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THE INFLUENCE OF CONGREGATIONALISM UPON VERMONT.¹

BY REV. HENRY FAIRBANKS, PH. D.

It is interesting to trace the influence of national characteristics and habits upon church systems and church life, and in turn the influence of ecclesiastical organization and ecclesiastical methods upon the development of national life, systems of thought and institutions. Congregationalism in Jerusalem was first planted in most uncongenial soil. The church in which "the whole multitude chose Stephen" and six others deacons, and "set them before the apostles" for the formal ordination, and that later wrote to a sister church saying "it seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send," etc., had to contend with the hierarchical ideas of the Jews, and the absolutism of the Romans. Very soon Jerusalem had a bishop, and as Christianity spread the emperor was ready to place himself at the head of the church. It was only when the gospel made its way among the free tribes of Germany that independency began to develop again in the church, and soon after in England. The strong Anglo-Saxon character would brook nothing between the man and his God; his relation was individual, personal, and, standing with other men in the same relation to the Infinite One above him, his clear sense of that relation kept before him all the while the fact that before God he was the equal of every other man, and no pope could give law to his conscience. The primitive organization of the apostolic church was naturally adopted, and in turn shaped not only the religious thinking, but largely the whole intellectual life, and the civil and other institutions of the country, so that we are hardly likely to over-

estimate the influence of independency in molding the England that we know.

And when the choicest seed-corn of this harvest was planted in New England, and a race to which the races of the earth had contributed their best, and in which the fittest of them all survived, came more exclusively under the influence of Congregationalism which had already done so much for it in England, under civil institutions of which the compact in the Mayflower was the prototype, with the constant teaching of personal responsibility to God and only to God, the constant presentation of the loftiest ideals, the motives of absolute loyalty and duty and the intellectual stimulus of the highest themes of thought discussed, and kept constantly in mind, not only as interesting, but as matters upon which might hang the issues of life and death; when Congregationalism, with its intellectual uplift, and its character building power, molded the development of the sturdiest race upon the planet, the magnificent result justified the wisdom that gave form to the life of the apostolic church, and honored the Providence that planted that church life in New England.

For a while the very intensity of religious conviction, and the experience of spiritual conflict caused an extravagant view of demoniacal power and demoniacal possession, but this error and all the crudities that went with it soon passed away, and the people of Massachusetts and Connecticut were at the very best stage of development when the most enterprising and vigorous among them began to move north into the territory that had been uninhabitable until the surren-

¹ Read before the General Convention at Bennington and before the Passumpsic Congregational Club at Newport.

der of Canada in 1760 put an end to the French and Indian wars. As now the strongest and most hopeful of our young people are likely to go West or to the cities, so then those who were best adapted to succeed went out into the new country. And in this way it came about that the Congregationally-molded people were providentially again sifted, and Congregational development of true Congregational enterprise gave rare manliness in the new settlements in the Connecticut, and the Champlain valleys. Vermont and the river towns of western New Hampshire seem to have attracted a better class of settlers than were then going to eastern New Hampshire and Maine, and very much better than those who went up the Hudson valley. The hardy independence born of, or fostered by, ecclesiastical independency, was fitted to endure the hardships, and was attracted by the adventures of pioneer life. The most vigorous chose the most remote location, and while those who loved ease remained in the southern towns of New England, or went along the coast to eastern New Hampshire and Maine, the more enterprising took their families by the bridle paths, or along the spotted trails into the northern woods. Perhaps the fact that President Wheelock, a good example of the independent Christian pioneer, acting under royal charter, one hundred and twenty-eight years ago, planted Dartmouth college deep in the wilderness—"Vox clamantis in deserto"—attracted into all that valley a better class of immigrants than otherwise would have come. However we explain it, the fact is apparent that Vermont and the river towns of New Hampshire were peopled by choice families, of the very best type of New England character. The contrast with central and eastern New Hampshire is evident, politically, and in many ways, even to this day.

When we speak of New England character we mean the character which Congregationalism has molded. This character appeared in the heroic age of our state. Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain boys may not have been given to singing psalms, but in courage, in earnestness born of sense of justice, and in loyalty to their convictions of duty they would not have been out of place among the noblest of the Ironsides of Cromwell's army. Royal injustice was met by the same conscientious resistance

as in England, and the same confidence that right would triumph, that those who went out "in the name of the great Jehovah" would not be finally overborne. This explains their rare courage, that grew into audacity, as they maintained themselves first against the hated Yorkers, a few scattered settlers against the sheriffs and the militia of what was growing to be a powerful state, with a price set upon the capture of their leaders, and later, with increasing but still small numbers, as an independent state, against New York and New Hampshire, each claiming the whole, and Massachusetts claiming the southern townships, and against Great Britain, also claiming their loyalty, threatening them with an army of 10,000 men on the northern border, and at the same time fearing their enmity so much as to be willing to pay any price in grants, concessions and commissions if she could corrupt the leaders, or purchase the friendship of the people. When New York proposed to send her militia there, Allen said, "the gods of the valleys are not the gods of the hills," when she declared resistance to sheriffs to be felony punishable by death "without benefit of clergy," the people whom her governor was pleased to call the "Bennington mob" challenged her to come and try, and these people of the New Hampshire grants, a few hundred in 1765, and not over 1,000 in 1771, successfully resisted the comparatively populous state. When in 1774 British oppression had become so intolerable that delegates from the colonies met at Philadelphia to devise measures of protest or resistance, New York clung to the royal cause, and by her officers, the first blood of the Revolution was shed at Westminster. This opposition to the Philadelphia congress, and this violence at Westminster awakened such intense indignation east of Lake Champlain that the few, who had been friendly to her cause, abandoned her, and the splendid spirit of independence shown by the Green Mountain boys was so contagious and attractive that it not only spread out into New York, so that royalist tendencies there were soon overborne, but also attracted a large number of towns both of eastern New York and of western New Hampshire to seek admission to the newly organized commonwealth of (New Connecticut, alias) Vermont, whose formal declaration of

independence was passed by the delegates of the towns in convention at Westminster, January 10th, 1777. Meeting again July 2d, after having consulted their constituents, the delegates adopted formally a constitution, and organized the state. Thirteen of their wisest men were constituted a Council of Safety, and organized the little army which united to the New Hampshire militia under Stark, and a small company from Massachusetts won the battle of Bennington, and gave the first effective check to Burgoyne, the first serious check to British arms in that war. In a private letter, Burgoyne writes of the Green Mountain boys: "The most active and the most rebellious race on the continent hangs like a gathering storm upon my left." Reading the story of this people, we hardly know whether to wonder more at their reckless bravery upon their military expeditions, or at their equally reckless audacity in their town meetings and their legislative assembly, hurling defiance at New York, at Great Britain, at the United Colonies supporting New York, at New Hampshire, at every state or party that would deprive them of the right of free self government.

The Continental Congress did not deal very honorably with them, or keep the promises made, for it could not afford to displease New York, and in order to force Vermont to yield, the federal troops were withdrawn, New Hampshire was censured for sending Stark to Bennington, (though he was thanked by congress after the result of the battle was known,) even the shovels and pick-axes were taken from those Vermonters who were entrenching on the northern border, and the local militia was left to guard, unaided, this natural road along the Memphremagog shores and the border of Champlain for British approach from Canada. And they did guard it, and guarded themselves as well from their neighbors upon both sides, and established their state so strongly that they ceased to fear that the United States would proceed by force to compel their allegiance to New York. Their very audacity seems to have been their safety, and the independent state, a republic by itself for fourteen years, had less internal disturbance, and less difficulties with its own people than any state of the confederation, and in all its struggles with its usurping neighbors, came out unscathed. The resplendent and self-for-

getful patriotism of the leaders has no parallel, even among the Greeks in the days of Marathon, or the Swiss of the times of Grutli.

It remained for a race that had been developed by nearly two centuries of ecclesiastical independency, to take possession of a wilderness, multiply with a rapidity that surpassed all previous experience, defend itself by force of arms and by wise diplomacy against the aggressions of strong and unscrupulous neighbors, and within twenty years from the settlement, establish a well-ordered state that was practically an independent nation. Only utter and absolute faith in the justice of their cause, and the righteousness of the God of Providence could have carried them safely through such trials to such success. The strong character developed along the lines of heredity, through five generations and more of Congregationalists, held up even those who were not Christians, and Governor Thomas Chittenden, the Christian statesman, had hardly more faith in the God of battles and the triumph of righteousness than had Allen and those who called themselves deists. A respect for religion seems to have been prevalent. Before proceeding to adopt a constitution in 1777 the delegates held a service, at which Rev. Aaron Hutchinson preached, and they were more deliberate at their devotions than in discussing the articles that were adopted, for the news came that Burgoyne was advancing, which for many of them meant that their homes were in danger.

The preamble of the constitution reads, "We, the representatives of the freemen of Vermont, in general convention met, confessing the goodness of the great governor of the universe, (who alone knows to what degree of earthly happiness mankind may attain by perfecting the arts of government,) in permitting the people of this state, by common consent, to form for themselves such just rules as they shall think best for governing their future society; and, being fully convinced that it is our indispensable duty to establish such original principles of government as will best promote the general happiness of the people," etc.

The first article asserts the natural rights of men, and adds that therefore no man may be held in servitude; no slave ever in Vermont. The third says "That all men have a natural and in-

alienable right to worship Almighty God according to the dictates of their own consciences and understandings, as in their opinion shall be regulated by the word of God," and that no authority can, or ought to be vested in, or assumed by, any power whatever, that shall in any case interfere with, or in any manner control the rights of conscience, in the free exercise of religious worship; nevertheless, every sect or denomination of Christians ought to observe the Lord's day, and keep up some sort of religious worship, which to them shall seem most agreeable to the revealed will of God."

Here is pure Congregationalism, written into the original constitution of the state, the duty to worship God, the right to worship according to the dictates of one's own conscience, regulated by the revealed will of God. Thompson says: "At the first session of the general assembly in 1778 a resolution to observe the Lord's day as the Sabbath was among the first adopted by that body, and in our first printed code of laws enacted in 1779, is a law enforcing the observance of the Christian Sabbath, and for preventing the disturbance of religious worship," a law which we might have, and have enforced, if we cared enough for the Lord's day to make a strong and united effort.

We have seen how much Congregational principles, and Congregational training had to do with molding the state in its formative and heroic age, and in making that age heroic. It remains to speak of the Congregationalism of these sons of Congregationalists, of the seventh and eighth generation. To form the church in Bennington, the first organized for this state, three Massachusetts churches united, or perhaps the separatists of three who had come out and called themselves the churches, with the pastor of one of them, who was made pastor of the Bennington church by act of a council consisting of two pastors and two messengers (as delegates were called), and pastor and people, together, moved to Bennington. They represented most advanced Congregationalist principles, and formally dissented from those clauses of the Cambridge platform which relate to using the civil power to support the gospel, and giving the civil magistrate ecclesiastical power.

Bennington and some neighboring towns seem to still show the molding hand of Capt. Samuel Robinson, a lineal descendant of Pastor John Robinson of the Leyden Pilgrims, who, after the close of the French and Indian wars in which he served, bought the rights of many of the grantees of land in the southwest towns, and settled in Bennington. He is credited with selecting those whom he desired as neighbors, and bringing great numbers of Congregationalists to Bennington, while those with Baptist preferences were directed to Shaftsbury, Episcopalians to Arlington, and those of no preference to Pownal. Bennington has been strongly Congregational, and in all its early history Congregationalism and patriotism went hand in hand. The church of Newbury was organized in 1764, when the nearest settlement was sixty miles distant, through the wilderness, the second organized for the state, but not in it, the town appointing a delegate, and the council meeting at Hollis, N. H., and installing Rev. Peter Powers pastor over the church, whose members he was to receive into it later. In some other instances, the people in their town meetings took the first step toward organizing churches, but while the raising of money by town tax for any sect which a majority of the inhabitants of any town preferred was authorized by an early statute, the civil authorities in very few cases interfered with, or sought to control religious worship.

In a great many of the new towns, however, money was voted for the support of preaching, and committees were raised to secure it, the feeling being general even among those not religiously inclined, that it was the proper thing to have Christian worship, or, as the St. Johnsbury vote read, "this town is too poor to go without the gospel;" so strong was the inherited tendency, in these sons of Congregationalists. And many churches grew up in connection with the labors of ministers thus employed for generally brief terms of service, by vote of the towns. Many more were planted by the missionaries, or itinerant preachers sent by the missionary society of Connecticut, that of Berkshire County, Massachusetts, and later by that of New Hampshire and by the

Vermont general convention organizing first as "The Vermont Missionary Society."

Sixteen Congregational churches had been organized before the Revolution, and ninety-seven before the close of the century, and perhaps nearly as many more Baptist and other churches whose polity is practically the same, and whose self-government fostered the same development of character. It is very remarkable, as showing the normal development of Congregational principles, that the ripened Congregationalism of Vermont, though it was the "standing order" and could have called to its aid the civil government of most of the towns, did not avail itself of its advantage, but suffered the law which authorized this to become a dead letter, and the Baptist interest did the same, until in 1807, a Baptist minister being speaker of the house, the law requiring the people of every community to be of and sustain the leading denomination and to all pay a tax for this purpose, or prove that they were of different views, and supported the gospel elsewhere, was repealed.

Absolute freedom of religious worship, absolute liberty of conscience, absolute recognition of the personal relation of every man to God, have characterized the whole history of the state, as controlled by Congregational principles. These are the conditions which secure the development of the strongest character, the very best type of true manliness. And along with these goes the stimulus to thought upon the very noblest and most difficult themes, which concerned every man, and which were kept before all the people by those strong intellectual leaders, who on each Lord's day,

Reasoned high—

Fixed fate, free-will, foreknowledge absolute."

The people who were subject to these influences, of course, were interested in education, and in educational movements the Congregationalists naturally took the lead, and to the natural influence of their principles in developing strong character, and intellectual vigor, was added the influence of the opportunities which they provided, for which the state

influenced by them provided, for obtaining knowledge, discipline and culture. At first, their most pressing need was for training-schools for their ministers. Dr. Burton at Thetford, and Dr. Josiah Hopkins of New Haven had for many years young men studying with them, and the ministers whom they trained would have been a credit to the best theological seminaries. In 1804 the associations of western Vermont formed an education society, "to aid pious and ingenious young men in indigent circumstances to acquire education for the gospel ministry;" and this appears to have been the first education society ever formed in America, as the Vermont Tract society, formed in 1808, anticipated by several years the American Tract society.

In 1811, the general convention considered the question of the establishment of a Vermont Theological seminary, which subject was in the hands of committees for some time, the question apparently arising whether more would not be accomplished in directing suitable young men into the ministry by a good Christian academy than by a seminary. Accordingly the committee reported in 1813 that the plan had been changed, and Kimball Union academy had been established and endowed at Meriden, N. H.

The interest of Congregationalists was not, however, limited to means for securing a supply of ministers, though this had been a leading object in the establishment of Dartmouth and the earlier New England colleges. Many of the leading ministers of Vermont in the early days were graduates of Dartmouth, others found their intellectual fellowship and stimulus there, and sent their sons or other bright young men from their parishes there, so that it was natural and right that they should have been interested in procuring early grants from this state to that college toward which the young men of the eastern slope gravitated.

So, also, it was natural for the ministers of the state to send their delegates desiring to organize a state association to meet at Hanover, and it was especially fitting that the convention of the denomination that had contributed most to the intellectual vigor of the people, should have been born under the hos-

pitable roof of the president of that college.

The same Congregational interest appeared in securing the establishment, charter and endowment of the two Vermont colleges, and the general convention, at the time of the graduation of the first class from Middlebury (1802), and annually thereafter for some years, appointed a preacher for the evening before commencement, and made the same arrangement for Burlington, two or three years later (1804), when her first class was graduated. A large proportion of the officers of these colleges have been Congregational ministers, and the interest of the churches in the colleges has been repaid, not only by the influence of these accomplished preachers, but also by the large number of the graduates, especially from Middlebury, that have entered the service of the churches, in the gospel ministry.

The same interest which is part of our Congregational inheritance, and is fostered by all Congregational influences, which appeared in the support given the colleges, is shown also in the academies, the high schools, and in the whole common school system of the state, in which, in its early history especially, this state was justly distinguished. I find a list of fifty-three academies and high-schools which were chartered in the state before the end of 1840. In most of the towns chartered by the state, lots were reserved for the support of county grammar schools, and leading Congregationalists taught in, or controlled those that were most widely useful. Much more money of Congregationalists than of others went for the endowment of academies, such as Burr and Burton, and St. Johnsbury, and others, the schools of other denominations not having been generally established until more recently.

The academies and grammar schools furnished teachers, and raised the standard of common school instruction throughout the state, and these schools with all their imperfections, have done on the whole, excellent work. Studying the history of our state, the conclusion is irresistible, that she owes very largely to her Congregational inheritance, and to Congregational activities, the general intelligence of her people, which not only makes it appear that a

native Vermonter who cannot read and write is "a prodigy of stupidity," but which has hitherto made the political and social absurdities which prevail in some other states, impossible with us.

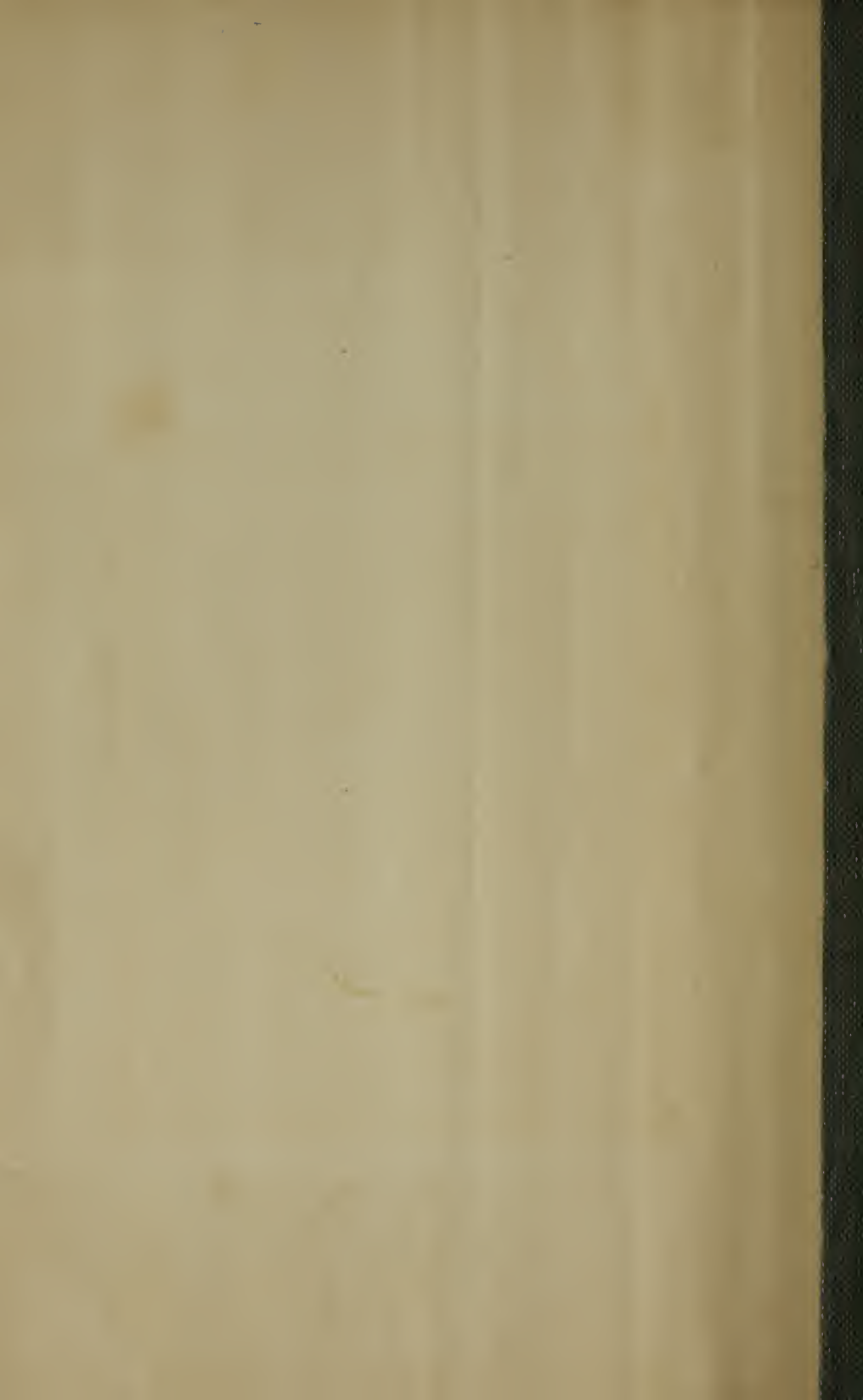
The general intelligence of our people during all our history will compare favorably with that of any people in the world. And along with this is still more apparent the strength of character, the true manliness, grounded in principle, which not only is seen among the people generally, but which has developed into greatness in so many of those who share here the inheritance and the living influences of Congregationalism. No state has had, in proportion to its population, nearly as much influence in the councils of the nation as Vermont. Her senators and representatives, Congregationally bred, have been leaders in all the past, and the same is true now. And outside the state the sons of Vermont have risen to great success. In the migration west, when New England men exerted an influence ten times in proportion to their numbers, in shaping the institutions of the belt of states quite to the Rocky Mountains and beyond, Vermont had her full share. Native born Vermonters were sent to congress, until, at the time that Thaddeus Stevens was a member, some one made investigation, and found that seven senators, and five members of the house of representatives were sons of this state.

More important still is the fact that the strength of character born of independency, and developed by Congregational systems of education, is capable of fearful mischief when not controlled by principle or permeated by spiritual life. Joseph Smith was born in Sharon, Brigham Young in Whittingham, and Noyes of the Oneida community in Brattleborough, he being educated for the Baptist ministry. The mighty forces developed along the lines which we have pointed out have as much potency for evil as for good, and our subject is of intensely practical importance. To us is committed the shaping and directing of these forces. It is true that a large proportion of the natives of the state have emigrated beyond her borders, more than forty per cent, now residing elsewhere; it is true that it is the most enterprising who go, those who show most of the developed strength

which we have discussed. But it is also true that there is great vigor in those that remain, and that it is possible to greatly increase this vigor. The alarming thing about our condition is that it is our native stock, American born, born of the race which shows the ripest fruits of Congregational development, which now is drifting away from all religious influences, and will soon be quite out of our possible control, and liable to use its strength as a monster of destruction. We have been keeping up our churches, we have been maintaining worship, we have been enjoying religion, and the people think of this as our affair, as the lodges are kept up by their members, and feel that our religion does not concern them. Brethren, this is our heritage, our people,—the noblest, strongest race upon earth, developed in the stress and conflict for rights of conscience, and individual liberty, in immediate personal relationship with the Supreme Righteous Governor, educated and trained by all the institutions which such minds in such relations have found desirable, and by most favoring provi-

dences, in all their history. And now the guiding moral power seems to have lost its hold, the rudder chains are broken, and unless the religious forces, working along Congregational lines can speedily gain control, the very strength of the propelling energy will only make the wreck more terrible.

If the members of our churches really feel responsibility for the religious and general welfare of the people of our state, and our ministers with thoughtful interest guide their efforts, wisdom will be given, and success will follow. If our people will make such self-sacrificing effort as our fathers made, with such absolute confidence in the triumph of right, new chapters of the influence of Congregationalism in the state will be written, chapters also of its influence going out from the state, upon the fast crystallizing character of our country, and its power, making for righteousness, will effect such evident success that God will be honored in the sight of all the people. May God, "by the working of His mighty power in us," accomplish this.



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